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When ninth-grade students are searching for help in expressing their newly discovered ideas, the principles of transformational grammar can be brought to their aid in the following ways: (1) Assign a provocative topic to the students which they are to discuss as fully as possible in one sentence. (2) Present only the kernel sentences of a well-constructed sentence from literature and have the students combine the kernels. (3) Ask the students to find well-written sentences and to write the component parts as kernel sentences. (4) Provide practice in writing the kinds of sentences demanded in school assignments. (5) Give formal demonstrations of transformations. (6) Assign a topic on which a sentence is to be written using certain grammatical structures in a given order. After completing these activities, students should frequently be required to write original sentences on given topics. (JS)

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Sentence Building and Transformational Grammar

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RECENTLY a number of plans for adapting the transformational rules of generative grammar to writing instruction have been described in the *English Journal* and elsewhere. These plans range from the rather thorough study of special grammatical materials described in the NCTE report of Donald Bateman and Frank Zidonis[1] to more casual programs of sentence-building exercises. The general method is to start with basic "kernel" sentences, which are then transformed into segments of other, usually more complex, sentences. Two assumptions are made in developing these plans. One is that a good sentence is put together or assembled; it does not spring forth fully formed from the mind of the writer. The other is that the study of a grammar which is operational in approach will facilitate the student's effort to write better sentences.

That such an approach to writing is needed, especially in the early years of high school, is suggested by the following words from James Squire's article on English composition in the *NEA Journal*, (November 1964), "Five Rules for Sequence":

> Young people consciously grapple with complex new sentence forms to express complex new ideas. . . . The exploding world of early adolescence, characterized by the discovery of many new ideas, almost inevitably leads to problems in expression. . . . During these years, teachers might best plan a sequence of composition that nourishes and encourages the expansion of ideas, rather than one so demanding that it restricts the fluency of student thinking.

With such a rationale, a developmental program in sentence writing in the ninth grade seems appropriate. At this time the student is studying the cultures of the ancient world, fundamental concepts of science, and literary classics. A grammar geared to the development of his ability to write good sentences is especially useful at this time, helping him to sort out

[1] *The Effect of a Study of Transformational Grammar on the Writing of Ninth and Tenth Graders*, Research Report No. 6 (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1966).

the onrush of new ideas and at the same time to express his own ideas with some coherence.

When a student is "grappling" with forms and ideas, a grammar of rigid classifications and static relationships offers little in the way of immediate help. He needs a grammar that moves with his thought, that in some way parallels the process going on in his mind. Generative grammar seems to provide this help. "The study of a systematic grammar which is a theoretical model of the process of sentence production is the logical way to modify the process itself, according to Bateman and Zidonis. No one contends that any writer ever has or ever will frame his sentences in accordance with mechanical rules, but, they conclude, "statistical analysis suggests . . : that there is a relation between a knowledge of generative grammar and an ability to produce well-formed sentences of greater structural complexity."

THE PRESENT paper is a description of a plan worked out for a ninth-grade class. It represents an attempt to bring the practical possibilities of transformational grammar to the student's service as he learns to write good sentences. Knowledge about the forms of language is brought to his attention when he recognizes a need for them. In most of the activities described below, the student composes his own sentences, using—as often as possible—his own materials. These, then, are suggestions for the junior high school teacher.

1. Make the student aware that he needs to know more about the forms of his language. Assign a topic to the class which they are to discuss as fully as possible in one sentence. This makes necessary an exploration of the resources of the language.

At first all students will be certain that the assignment is impossible. Discuss in one sentence the dispute over the authenticity of unidentified flying objects. It can't be done. But the assignment only says to do it "as fully as possible." As soon as the students become convinced that they have to do it whether it is possible or not, they begin a patient effort to write out the *correct* side of the argument. The teacher is plainly hard to convince.

This is a topic about which few ninth-graders can remain indifferent. The requirement of having to compress all his ideas into one sentence is at first a nuisance to the student, but gradually it takes over as the most interesting part of the assignment. He seems to feel that if he can succeed in writing a grammatical sentence on the topic, this will somehow prove that his viewpoint is the correct one.

But whatever the motivation, students will diligently search for the words that will help them to convince. At this point no formal help is needed; the best thing for the teacher to do is to walk around from one student to another, suggesting words or phrases which will help them link thoughts together. This groping, I believe, is the psychological process of which the idea of transformations is a synthetic approximation.

The activity can be repeated many times throughout the year, with increasingly good results. There are numerous sure-fire topics which will stir the enthusiasm of ninth-graders. One is the probability of life on other planets, which for some reason fascinates students particularly at this age. Another is the inadvisability of lengthy homework assignments. The list could be made indefinitely long.

2. Present well-constructed sentences from fine literature. In this activity[2] the student does not at first see the sentence in final form, but as a series of brief sentences corresponding to the structural

[2]Compare this with an exercise in: John C. Hodges with Mary Whitten, *Harbrace College Handbook*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. 272-3.

units of the completed sentence. For example, one sentence was taken from *The Good Earth:*

> All through the late spring and early summer the water rose and at last it lay like a great sea, lovely and idle, mirroring cloud and moon and willows and bamboos whose trunks were submerged.

It was presented thus to the students:

> The water rose all through the late spring and early summer. At last it lay like a great sea. The water was lovely and idle. It mirrored cloud and moon and willows and bamboos. Their trunks were submerged.

These kernel sentences can be transformed and combined in a surprising number of different ways—none of them as lovely as the original sentence as Pearl Buck wrote it.

This activity introduces the element of choice in writing and therefore of style. The student is not trying to *reproduce* the sentence as written by Pearl Buck but to compose a fluent sentence from given materials. No two students will use the same structural forms in exactly the same way, and thus comparisons are natural and inevitable. This is a good time for the teacher to begin, informally, to use the names of the different forms being used. Thus technical knowledge is based upon intuitive grasp. (It is interesting to note that in the case of this particular sentence, all students agreed that Miss Buck's sentence was far superior to any of their versions. In other cases, they felt that one or two student sentences were "almost as good" as the original.)

3. Ask the students to find two or three superior sentences from great books in the library and analyze them by writing their component parts as kernel sentences.

This process is the reverse of the foregoing one, and gives students a thorough coverage of the process of transforming basic ideas into components of larger sentences. Students may work together, one student giving another a set of kernel sentences from a sentence in *Moby Dick*, for example, and telling him to write a good sentence from them.

This too is an activity that can be repeated throughout the year. At first it is the lengthiest sentence that most impresses a student, but later on in the year he is bringing in real gems (and, it is hoped, sometimes going on to read the whole book).

4. Provide practice in writing sentences of the kind which students will normally be asked to write in school assignments.

Many times students fail to give good answers to examination questions in science or history, because they are unable to coordinate the materials at their command into sentences which clearly demonstrate the relations between the different factors. A ready command of the forms of the language may help them in composing sentences, and may even enable them to see relationships more clearly.

Teachers from other subjects might be willing to provide sets of basic sentences, all bearing a discernible relation to some topic which their classes have studied. The given sentences do not have to conform to a rigid mold to qualify as "kernel" sentences in these activities. They should merely be simple, basic sentences which can serve as building materials for more complex sentences. Here is an example from an English assignment:

a. Brutus feared Caesar's power.
b. He compared Caesar to a serpent's egg.
c. The egg is not harmful in the shell.
d. It is hatched.
e. It may be poisonous.

One student version:

> Brutus, fearing Caesar's power, compared Caesar to a serpent's egg which, although not harmful in the shell, may become poisonous when hatched.

It is interesting to note that sentences written in this manner by students are usually well punctuated. Knowing precisely where the segments of their sentences came from and how they were formed, the students seem to have no difficulty in knowing where the parts are joined together and what kind of punctuation is needed. It is likely that this ability will carry over to other writing activities.

5. Give formal demonstration of transformations: subordination, formation of relative clauses, deletion of relative pronouns in transforming clauses to verbal phrases, etc.

The students will find this demonstration very easy to follow, for the reason that they have been actively engaged in performing these very operations for some time. It can be as complete and as technical as the teacher wishes, depending upon his purpose.

6. Assign a topic on which a sentence is to be written, this time according to specifications.

For example: Write a sentence narrating the meeting between Pip and Magwitch in the churchyard in *Great Expectations*. Use the following structures in the given order: participial phrase, subject, appositive, predicate, relative clause. One student version:

> Wandering alone through a churchyard near the marshes, Pip, a young orphan boy, met an escaped convict, who grabbed him and demanded food and a file as a price for his release.

It was fun for the students, reading their sentences aloud, to hear the amazing number of different sentences that could be written on one topic and one pattern.

AFTER completing this series of activities, students should frequently be called upon to write sentences on given topics, using their own materials. This requires decisions about what to include, how to assemble the selected material, and what sentence units to use. Some topics which my students enjoyed trying their skill at were:

1. A typical Batman adventure.
2. My understanding with my parents about how my hair is to be worn. (Some of these read like legal contracts. One boy and his parents had agreed upon a line of demarcation: his parents governed the part from his ears to the back; he governed the part from his ears to the front.)
3. An analysis of the forces involved in flying a kite.
4. Plato's parable of the cave.
5. Symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*.
6. Lowering the voting age to 18.

The controlled use of a variety of structures in these sentences showed a considerable improvement over the frequent *and so*'s and *and then*'s of earlier sentences.

Although this program places primary importance on rhetorical matters, it also provides a good foundation for any kind of work in grammar. When students are comfortable in using various forms, they can step into technical analysis very easily. For example, one exceptionally good class tried immediate constituent analysis and found it fascinating. Their training in the construction of good sentences had erased their fears of unfamiliar grammatical terms.